

Editorial

Gesnerus. Swiss Journal for the History of Medicine and Science, 1943-2020

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Dear readers of *Gesnerus*,

The volume you hold in your hand is the last issue of our journal in its present form. *Gesnerus*, continuously published since 1943, will continue with a new name, a new team, and new patrons. From 2021 onwards, it will be known as the *European Journal for the History of Medicine and Health* (EHMH), edited jointly by the Swiss Society for the History of Medicine and Natural Sciences and the European Association for the History of Medicine and Health and will be published by Brill (Leiden).

In the early 1920s, 100 years ago, the Swiss Society for the History of Medicine and the Natural Sciences was founded by two very different private scholars, between whom there was nevertheless a certain affinity.¹ One was Arnold C. Klebs (1870-1943), a physician from Bern and former director of the Chicago Tuberculosis Institute, who now resided as a wealthy private citizen in Nyon on Lake Geneva. The other was Henry E. Sigerist (1891-1957), who came from a wealthy Schaffhausen family and was in the process of completing his habilitation thesis in medical history in Zurich. The two are paradigmatic representatives of those whom the society, founded in 1921, wanted to address. As Klebs himself put it in a letter to Sigerist: “We want to attract the collector as well as the philosopher, and also those who are simply sentimentally interested in the old.”² With the collector, Klebs had careful empirical scholars like himself in mind; with the phi-

1 On the history of the Society, cf. the editorials in *Gesnerus* 28 (1971), 72-78; 53 (1996), 165-174.

2 «Wir wollen den Sammler sowohl wie den Philosophen anziehen, und auch den der sich einfach sentimental für's Alte interessiert.» Letter from 18 November 1921, in Marcel H. Bickel (ed.): Henry E. Sigerist, *Vier ausgewählte Briefwechsel mit Medizinhistorikern der Schweiz* (Bern 2008), 62.

losopher, he presumably thought of more critical and analytical historians, such as Sigerist; and with the “sentimental” doctor, he included the whole range of physicians and scientists who, for various reasons, were interested in the history of their subject and profession.

This broad, unifying goal was also characteristic of the journal *Gesnerus*, founded in 1943.³ As early as 1922, a book series had been published (“Veröffentlichungen der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Medizin und der Naturwissenschaften”), but there had not been a periodical in which to publish shorter works.⁴ The editorial of the first issue highlighted the “special character” of the new journal, namely that it strived for “a lively relationship with the present” (“lebendige Beziehung zur Gegenwart”). A “small place was built where the *unity* of research was to be emphasized through reflection on the idealistic foundations of natural science and medicine, and where the lively connection in the historical development of a discovery or an idea was to be demonstrated”.⁵ In accordance with this unitarian vision, the editors described themselves as the “heirs” of the “patron” of the journal, Conrad Gessner, as well as of great Swiss natural scientists and physicians such as Paracelsus, Leonhard Euler, Albrecht von Haller, Samuel-Auguste Tissot or Louis Agassiz.⁶

This task of strengthening the unity and identity of medicine through the historical construction of a linear development of its scientific basis had been one of the goals, if not the foremost goal, of medical historiography since the dawn of modern biomedicine in the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ The desire for unity was felt particularly keenly at the time when the journal was founded, during the turmoil of the Second World War. In the 1960s and 1970s, this unifying impulse was still of great importance for *Gesnerus*, owing to the fact that practicing physicians were the defining part of what

3 The history of *Gesnerus* is only superficially documented; the Society’s archival material in the Medical Historical Archive in Zurich is not very informative. Important details can be found in the *Gesnerus* editorial for the 25th year [25, (1968), 1-4] and in subsequent editorials on the occasion of editorial changes: 30 (1973), 201-202; 38 (1981), 276; 39 (1982), 318; 46 (1989), 7-9; 50 (1993), 6-10; 59 (2002), 165-166.

4 Annual report from 1941, in *Verhandlungen der SNG* 1942, 250.

5 «Man errichte eine kleine Stätte, an welcher durch Besinnung auf die ideellen Grundlagen von Naturwissenschaften und Medizin die *Einheit* der Forschung betont und der lebendige Zusammenhang im historischen Gang einer Entdeckung oder einer Idee aufgezeigt werden soll». *Gesnerus* 1 (1943), 3-4.

6 The editorial does not state explicitly why Gessner was selected as patron but as reference is made to his residence in different Swiss cities (Zürich, Basel, Lausanne), this seems to have been one of the reasons.

7 Cf., e.g., Richard Toellner: «Der Funktionswandel der Wissenschaftshistoriographie am Beispiel der Medizingeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts», in: Ralf Bröer (ed.): *Eine Wissenschaft emanzipiert sich. Die Medizinhistoriographie von der Aufklärung bis zur Postmoderne* (Pfaffenweiler 1999), 175-187.

was a small, rather loosely organized and not very active society.⁸ It can be seen in numerous articles, for example in Nikolaus Mani's contribution on Claude Bernard, where Mani emphasized the "lively freshness" of Bernard's works, a quality retained to this day;⁹ or in Huldrych Koelbing's view that an essential achievement of Felix Platter was to combine the "fertile new" with the "still indispensable old".¹⁰ The continuity of this orientation was also supported by the fact that the physician and pharmacologist Professor Hans Fischer (1896-1972) served as editor-in-chief of *Gesnerus* for 30 years, from 1943 to 1973. It comes to no surprise that on the occasion of the 25th anniversary in 1968, the editorial from 1943 was still affirmatively quoted in detail, stressing the importance of a "living relationship between past and present".¹¹

The Society was aware of the limitations of its journal, with its focus on near-source studies of the great heroes of antiquity and early modern times. They described their project in 1943 as "more than modest" when compared with Sudhoff's *Archiv*, Sigerist's *Bulletin* or Sarton's *Isis*.¹² Thirty years later, Koelbing noted: "Its fruits are perhaps not as brilliant as some of those that appear in neighboring countries; its efforts are directed primarily at capturing historical reality and not so much at revealing philosophical connections; but it is with this line that *Gesnerus* has earned its modest but firm place among the history of science journals of the world".¹³

This awareness of the limitations of the journal was, however, counterbalanced by one of the great strengths of *Gesnerus*, namely its early internationality and openness. Major figures like Sigerist, Erwin Ackerknecht (1906-1988), or Jean Starobinski (1920-2019) were important in this respect. In

8 In one instance, this urge for unity is underpinned by symbolism involving blood and spirit. In a congratulatory letter on the occasion of his 60th birthday, president William-Henri Schopfer and assessor Bernhard Milt wrote the following words of praise to editor Fischer: «Abendländische Medizingeschichte ist aber noch mehr: Blut von unserem Blut, Geist von unserem Geist, in uns lebendig werdende Vergangenheit, mit der wir verwurzelt und verbunden sind. In schweizerischem und abendländischem Sinn haben Sie auch unsere Aemter verwaltet, ganz besonders die Redaktion des *Gesnerus*, und ihn durch alle Fährnisse und äußern Schwierigkeiten bis auf den heutigen Tag erhalten.» *Gesnerus* 10 (1953), 3.

9 *Gesnerus* 22 (1965), 28.

10 *Gesnerus* 22 (1965), 67.

11 *Gesnerus* 25 (1968), 4.

12 *Gesnerus* 1 (1943), 2.

13 «Ihre Früchte sind im ganzen vielleicht nicht so brillant wie manches, was in den Nachbarländern erscheint; ihr Bemühen ist vor allem auf die Erfassung der historischen Wirklichkeit gerichtet und nicht so sehr auf die Enthüllung philosophischer Zusammenhänge; doch mit dieser Linie hat sich *Gesnerus* seinen bescheidenen, aber festen Platz unter den wissenschaftsgeschichtlichen Zeitschriften der Welt erworben.» *Gesnerus* 30 (1973), 201.

addition to the dominance of German-speaking and, secondarily, French-speaking scholarship, there have been regular contributions in English and Italian since the 1940s. Issue 8/1-2 (1951) for the 60th birthday of Sigerist, for example, was particularly international, with contributions from Walter Artelt (Frankfurt a.M.), Luigi Belloni and Arturo Castiglioni (Milano), John F. Fulton (New Haven, CT), Chauncey D. Leake (Galveston, TX), Charles Singer (Cornwall), Owsei Temkin (Baltimore, MD) and Ernest Wickersheimer (Strasbourg). Of even more importance for the reception of international developments and new research perspectives, however, were the reviews, to which *Gesnerus* devoted special attention from the beginning. For example, those written by Ackerknecht, who arrived in Zürich from the US in 1957, were particularly important. All told, he contributed over 200 reviews. They were often short but pointed, and did not shy away from the caustic criticism with which those who knew the author would have been acquainted. Above all, however, they drew attention to important newer approaches, such as the novelty of Charles Rosenberg's *Cholera Years* of 1962.¹⁴

Huldrych Koelbing (1923-2007) took over the role of editor-in-chief in 1989, and still quoted heavily from the first conceptions of 1943, while pointing also to specific fields or methods – like the history of psychiatry and social history – as promising new perspectives for the discipline: “This development goes hand in hand with the changing interest of the general historiography in medicine, its representatives and institutions as well as its object, sick people and their diseases, especially epidemic ones. ... Diseases, medicine, and health professionals as integral parts of a broadened general history – this view opens up great perspectives and fruitful possibilities of mutual enrichment. ... *Gesnerus* puts itself with conviction at the service of this interdisciplinary mode of research and approach.”¹⁵

The same values of academic excellence and interdisciplinarity have prevailed with its subsequent successive editors, Marcel Bickel (1927-2017), from 1993 to 2001, Vincent Barras, from 2002, and together with Hubert Steinke, from 2012 until today. Barras, in his opening editorial from 2002, underlined the strong continuity of the journal: “The eclecticism of our edi-

14 *Gesnerus* 30 (1962), 98.

15 «Diese Entwicklung geht Hand in Hand mit dem wechselnden Interesse der allgemeinen Geschichtswissenschaft an der Medizin, an ihren Vertretern und Institutionen sowie an ihrem Objekt, den kranken Menschen und ihren Krankheiten, besonders den epidemischen. ... Krankheiten, Heilkunde und Heilpersonen als integrierende Bestandteile einer weitgefassten Allgemeingeschichte – diese Auffassung eröffnet grosse Perspektiven und fruchtbare Möglichkeiten gegenseitiger Bereicherung. *Gesnerus* stellt sich mit Ueberzeugung auch in den Dienst dieser interdisziplinären Forschungs- und Betrachtungsweise.» *Gesnerus* 46 (1989), 8.

torial team, combined with the strong tradition of a discipline, should thus be a guarantee of the direction that *Gesnerus* wishes to defend: to promote without any dogmatic spirit – if not the non-partisan dogma of quality and intellectual honesty – the possibility of exchanges, discussions, debates, links, in short, in the image of the promises, kept or to come, that Roy Porter and Owsei Temkin [who had just died at the time of the editorial change] offered to the history of medicine and science; in other words, trying to constitute a place where the new configurations that are the real guarantee of the pursuit of a discipline can be traced.”¹⁶

Since the turn of the millennium, *Gesnerus* has continued to uphold these academic and ethical values together with its increasing congruence with international standards: an English subtitle (“Swiss Journal of the History of Medicine and Sciences”) was added in 1988, an editorial board was active from 1989 onwards, a proper peer-review system was established in 1993, and an international scientific committee put together in 2003. An article published in 2011 by Hubert Steinke and Yves Lang devoted to the internationality in medical history journals highlights its international profile. From 1997 to 2006, the articles published in *Gesnerus* were from authors from Switzerland (51%), Germany (21%), France (8%), and the UK, Australia, Canada and USA (10%), making *Gesnerus* more international than any other medico-historical journal with a peer-review policy during this period. Moreover, only 29 per cent of those articles focused on topics of national history, less than any other peer-reviewed journal in the domain; and one third of all papers were devoted to early modern medicine, more than any other comparable peer-reviewed journal.¹⁷ Contrary to received opinion, the national focus – with a preponderance of native topics or authors – seems thus to have been a less prominent characteristic of *Gesnerus* than of some of its peer journals.

More importantly perhaps, the recent evolution of *Gesnerus*, its structure and contents, also reflects – and has perhaps also made some small contribution to – deeper transformations in medical and general historiography in the last decades: professionalisation of the history of medicine on the one side, and major changes in historical epistemology on the other. These have led to a decline of narrowly focused national histories, the emergence of post-colonial science and technology or gender studies, as well as more controversial issues like the confrontation of the established discipline with the emerging trends in medical humanities.

¹⁶ *Gesnerus* 59 (2002) 166.

¹⁷ Hubert Steinke, Yves Lang, «Parochialism or self-consciousness? Internationality in medical history journals,” *Medical History* 55 (2011), 523-538.

From its beginnings, *Gesnerus* has always striven to remain relevant. In 1943, this meant placing an emphasis on the unity of medicine and – to some extent – the local heritage, addressing local physicians. In 2020, the publication of articles on the history of medicine and health requires the adoption of a critical approach to understanding the way medicine, science and health policies interact with patients and diseases within a globalized world. But beyond globalization, it also requires an acknowledgement of the diversity of history and historiography. Bringing together and bridging various perspectives has always been integral to the DNA of multilingual and federalist Switzerland – just as it has been quintessential to the Swiss journal. The transformation of *Gesnerus* into the *European Journal for the History of Medicine and Health* is a major change but it is also very much a continuation of our project in the academic landscape of the twenty-first century.

Editors and editorial board of Gesnerus 1943-2020

period	editors-in-chief	editorial board
1943-1973	Hans Fischer	
1974-1980	Hans H. Walser	with support from Heinz Balmer 1976-1980
1981-1982	Heinz Balmer	
1983-1988	Carl Haffter	
1989-1992	Huldrych Koelbing	Marcel Bickel (from 1992), Philippe Mudry, Hans K. Schmutz, Heidi Seger, Antoinette Stettler (until 1991)
1993-2001	Marcel Bickel	Vincent Barras, Urs Boschung, Huldrych Koelbing, Hans K. Schmutz, Heidi Seger
2002-2011	Vincent Barras	Marcel Bickel (until 2005), Christian Bonah (from 2010), Urs Boschung (until 2004), Danièle Calinon (until 2008), Michael Hagner (from 2010), Micheline Louis-Courvoisier, Francesco Panese, Iris Ritzmann, Hans K. Schmutz, Hubert Steinke (from 2005), Jakob Tanner, Daniela Vaj (from 2009)
2012-2020	Vincent Barras, Hubert Steinke	Christian Bonah, Michael Hagner, Micheline Louis-Courvoisier (until 2012), Francesco Panese, Iris Ritzmann, Hans K. Schmutz, Jakob Tanner, Daniela Vaj (until 2012)